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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002392

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: FOUR MORE DAMASCUS-BEIRUT DECLARATION SIGNATORIES
INTERROGATED, AS BUNNI FACES ADDITIONAL CHARGES RELATED TO
EC-FINANCED CENTER

REF: (A) DAMASCUS 2338 (B) DAMASCUS 2318 (C) DAMASCUS
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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Kathy Johnson-Casares for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Four signatories of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration (DBD), including prominent human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, were interrogated on May 21 by investigatory judges at the Palace of Justice Criminal Court in Damascus. Bunni, who has been on a hunger strike for the last two days, was interrogated solely about his involvement with a European Commission (EC)-funded human rights center, while the other three activists were questioned about their involvement with the DBD. According to human rights activists, Bunni and two other activists were physically assaulted by agents at a State Security branch prior to their transfer to Adraa prison. The most serious of the five charges against the men include weakening national feelings and provoking sectarian divisions, which can carry up to a life sentence. Bunni faces an additional two charges related to his work with the EC on the now-closed Civil Society Training Center. Meanwhile, a statement by the European Union condemning the wave of arrests has provoked harsh SARG criticism, while international human organizations have also issued statements against the SARG's latest crackdown. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Four Damascus-Beirut Declaration (DBD) signatories, including prominent human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, former political prisoner and Communist Action Party activist Mahmoud Issa, Atassi Forum member Mohammed Mahfouz, and National Democratic Front activist Suleiman al-Shummar, were all interrogated on May 21 by investigatory judges at the Palace of Justice Criminal Court in Damascus. Five other signatories were interrogated without lawyers present on May 18, including Ghaleb Amar, Khalil Hussein, Safwan Tayfour, Mahmoud Mur'i, and Nidal Darwish (ref A). All nine men face five charges, the most serious of which is weakening national feelings and provoking a sectarian feud, which can carry up to a life sentence. Other charges include weakening the state's dignity, cursing the President, publishing false or exaggerated news, and abusing public servants during their working hours. (NOTE: Fellow signatory Michel Kilo, who was interrogated on May 17 (ref B), also faces the same charges.)

According to human rights activists, Bunni, Darwish, and Mahfouz were all hit a number of times by State Security agents during their initial detention with State Security, prior to their transfer to Adraa prison. In addition to Poloff, representatives from the Austrian, UK, and Dutch embassies were present at the courthouse at the time of the interrogation.

¶3. (C) BUNNI ON HUNGER STRIKE, WILL FACE ADDITIONAL

CHARGES RELATED TO EC CIVIL SOCIETY TRAINING CENTER:

According to Bunni's wife, he has been on hunger strike since arriving at Adraa prison but is consuming water. During a brief conversation following his interrogation, he told his wife that the investigating judge's questions dealt solely with the EC-funded Civil Society Training Center, of which Bunni remains the official director, despite its closing by SARG authorities on March 1 (ref C). According to human rights lawyers, Bunni is facing charges of conspiracy with a foreign power and belonging to a secret organization attempting to overthrow the state, in addition to the DBD-related charges.

¶4. (C) OTHER SIGNATORIES DETAINED, RELEASED: Meanwhile, signatory Abbas Abbas was released over the weekend, while fellow signatory Kamal Sheikho was informed by State Security that he was no longer being sought. Signatory and writer Fayed Sara told Poloff that he was detained for approximately two hours by State Security on May 20 for questioning. Similarly, fellow signatory and university professor Munir Shahoud was detained for questioning by Lattakia State Security officials for several hours and later released. Signatory Khaled Khalifeh, who was detained briefly last week, was re-detained on May 21 and released after several hours.

¶5. (C) CIVIL SOCIETY COMMUNITY TURNS OUT TO SUPPORT DETAINEES, ASKS EU TO TAKE FURTHER ACTION: Approximately 30 civil society activists, including senior opposition figure Riad at-Turk, former Damascus Spring detainees Habib Issa and Mamoun al-Homsi, activists Nejati Tayyara, members of the newly-formed Kurdish Committee for Human Rights, and representatives from all the local human rights organizations, joined the detainees' family members as they

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waited to see their arrested relatives. Tayyara, Sara, and Homsi all told the EU diplomats present in separate conversations that the EU's May 19 statement on the activists' arrest was a good step, but that the EU should consider taking further measures, including withdrawing their ambassadors for a period of time. The EU diplomats declined to comment, but did express their dismay that Bunni's additional charges were related to his work with the EC.

¶6. (C) SARG CRITICIZES EU STATEMENT: The SARG responded to the EU's May 19 statement, calling it an "intervention in Syria's internal affairs" and accusing the EU of hypocrisy. According to press reports, an MFA spokesman said that EU members have no right to defend human rights and democracy since some EU members states "forced a siege on Palestinians and questioned their democratic choice to select the government." An article in the SARG-controlled Cham Press added that the EU was being hypocritical as some member nations were being investigated for "allegedly abetting a network of secret US prisons." Austrian DCM Doris Danler told Polchief that the MFA summoned the EU and Austrian ambassadors separately to deliver a formal complaint about the statement, with each meeting consisting only of a reading of the MFA's statement and little or no discussion. Danler seemed somewhat surprised that the EU had been able to publish the statement so quickly. Danler added that EU Heads of Mission were meeting May 22 to consider further steps. Although the meeting was still underway when she met with Polchief, it was her sense that member states wanted to wait and assess the situation before undertaking any further steps. She did not comment further on the additional charges brought against Bunni.

¶7. (C) INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS ALSO WEIGH IN: In addition to the EU, both Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have issued statements in the last week condemning the arrest wave. AI's statement details the DBD arrests, as well as the cases of Fateh Jammous, Ali and Mohammed Abdullah, and Kamal Labwani, and designates all of the detainees as prisoners of conscious. It also calls

for the release of these detainees, as well as of all other prisoners of conscience in Syria. HRW, in a similar statement dated May 20, details the arrests of the DBD signatories and calls for their release, as well as for the SARG to "end their harassment and persecution of human rights defenders and activists."

¶8. (C) COMMENT: While the arrest wave connected to the DBD appears to have subsided somewhat for now, it is becoming clear that the SARG is intent on using its relatively open criminal court system to conduct show trials against its harshest critics like Bunni and fellow dissident and signatory Michel Kilo, moving away from its largely discredited Supreme State Security Court. Activists have quietly welcomed the EU's public statement and some hope that the EU continues to exercise more of its perceived leverage with the SARG. Other activists believe that the SARG is immune to international criticism, a belief that is tempered somewhat by the SARG's vehement denunciation of the EU's statement. How the EU will deal with the additional, EC-Center-related charges against Bunni remains unclear, as their stated policy of "quiet diplomacy" on the Center seems to have failed.

JOHNSON-CASARES